

Talking to Families

Promoting Trust, Respect, &
Collaboration

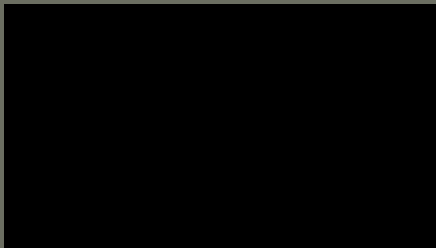
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Let's talk about ...

- Creating opportunities for informal exchanges
 - Acknowledging family & child strengths
 - Soliciting parents' opinions & ideas
 - Seeking understanding – multiple perspectives
 - Demonstrating caring for the whole family (family-centered practice)
 - Acknowledging & responding to feelings
- Through an Infant Mental Health Lens*

Within the context of ...

Infant Mental Health Principles & Practices



Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health® Competencies

Theoretical Foundations

- Infant/very young child & family-centered practice

Direct Service Skills

- Responding with empathy

Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others
- Empathy & compassion

Falks, 2001, p. 26

"Priorities for parents and professionals often differ. It is as if we each have on our own set of headphones and are listening to our own music with its own tune, words, and rhythm. There's the mother son, the father song, the speech pathologist song, the neurologist song, and the teacher song. Sometimes the only song we can momentarily agree on is ...

Hit the road Jack, and don't you come back no more!"

Janice Falks, 2001, p. 22

Why is it so difficult? "Here you are, the professional, eagerly awaiting your new dance partner. Your arms are stretched out inviting us, parents, to enter your world ... We, as parents having not chosen this dance, are usually not as eager to join you. We may approach you not with open arms but with tightly folded ones clutched to our chest ... We may feel reluctant, ambivalent, and often unwilling. For one thing, if we choose to join you, we have to acknowledge that our child has special needs. We have to acknowledge that we are entering your world – one that is initially unfamiliar and frightening. Entering into our partnership with you demands that we let go of our dreams and begin to build new ones.

Create opportunities for informal exchanges

Building rapport/Developing the Working Alliance
 Create opportunities for frequent & ongoing conversations
 Establishing informal exchanges is our responsibility
 The accumulation of exchanges strengthens our relationship



Informal Communication

What are your ideas for strengthening/increasing informal exchanges with the families you work with?

Acknowledging Child & Family Strengths

What kinds of questions do we ask families?
What is our focus?

Acknowledging Child & Family Strengths

- Run the risk of implying that parents lack competence without our help and that they could always do better than they are already doing. We may imply their children are deficient.
- Difficult if not impossible to establish a true partnership if parents perceive themselves to be in a one-down position or, even worse, when they feel that the professional doesn't recognize the strengths they bring to the table.
- Frequency of communication critical to the development of trusting parent-professional relationships (Blue-Banning and colleagues 2004)
- One of the most important qualities that a professional can have is that he/she demonstrates sincere caring about their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004)
- Along the way ... it is important to acknowledge explicitly children's accomplishments (no matter how small) and their positive attributes ... fully appreciate what the child CAN do
- Compliments about the child should be a part of our everyday interactions with parents and not reserved for formal assessments, annual meetings, or formal summaries of a child's progress examples could be



It is difficult if not impossible to establish a true partnership if parents perceive themselves to be in a one-down position or, even worse, when they feel that the professional doesn't recognize the strengths they bring to the table.

Eric Panning and colleagues 2004

The frequency of communication is critical to the development of trusting parent-professional relationships



Eric Panning and colleagues 2004

One of the most important qualities that a professional can have is that he/she demonstrates sincere caring about their child





Along the way it is important to explicitly acknowledge accomplishments (no matter how small) and positive attributes, fully appreciate what the child CAN do

I can live for two
months on a good
compliment.
- Mark Twain

Compliments about the child should be a part of our everyday interactions with parents and not reserved for formal assessments, annual meetings, or formal summaries of a child's progress

Sample Child Compliments

- He's just chock full of energy, isn't he?
- What a happy baby she is!
- She may not quite be getting it, but just look at how she's concentrating.
- He's so much fun to be with!
- He's trying so hard.
- Those big brown eyes are just drinking it all in, aren't they?
- I think I'm falling in love.

Cracking your
parenting style was so
much easier before
I became a
parent.

somecards
SOME THINGS



RECOGNIZE the
parents'
contributions to
the child's
growth,
development
and well-being

Routinely compliment parents ... no big productions ... less obvious, well-timed compliments are more sincere and often less awkwardly accepted.



Sample Parent "Compliments"

- Just look how he responds to your voice
- You are so patient with her, clearly she thrives on it
- He loves this book. What a great find! Where did you get it?
- You must be doing something right – he hasn't been sick for weeks!
- Those blocks are just the right size for his hands to grasp.
- You're so good at figuring out what she wants.
- I don't know how you do it – trying to balance so many things at one time

Acknowledging Child & Family Strengths

CONSIDER	WWW.ROBINROSE.COM
• Frequency of communication	• How are you feeling?
• Balance of power in the relationship	• Top 2 needs – safety & validation
• What is our focus?	• If you build it they will come
• Is being "helpful" helpful?	• Unconditional Respect & QTIP

Soliciting Parents' Opinions & Ideas

The Home Visitor/Early Interventionist/Therapist Lament

"why don't parents follow through?????"

GOOD IDEA



BAD IDEA



The lack of parental "follow through" may be because the "solution" the professional offered wasn't acceptable to the parents in the first place.

**KEEP
CALM
AND
RESIST
THE URGE**

to immediately dive
into your "tool bag"
and pull out a
strategy to "solve"
the child's or parent's
problem

Use Reflective Questions

- What have you been doing?
- What have you tried?
- What do you think it would take for ... to ...
- What has worked in similar situations in the past.
- What are some other ways you've thought about using to
- Why do you think that didn't work?
- What do you remember about which parts of that worked and/or didn't work?
- What do you think it would take to make a difference?

Offer ideas and/or additional information only after getting permission from the parent to share information.

- Is this a parent who will be responsive to "brain science" and "research" or is this a parent who will more likely be responsive to something like ... "many of the families I've worked with in the past have shared with me Worked well for them in a similar situation"
- Which of the ideas we've explored today seems to be something you'd like to try?
- How do you think this will fit into your already busy schedule?
- Do you see any potential difficulties implementing this idea?
- In what ways might we need to modify this idea to make sure it works for you, your child, and the rest of your family?
- So ... are you good with trying ... between now and the next time we meet? You can let me know what worked or didn't work and what you noticed and we will put our heads together next time.

What if the parent says "just tell me what to do to help Johnny" ?

- Parents are know more about their children and family than we do
- Parents (in my opinion) are right 99.9% of the time
- Empathize with the parent. Acknowledge their frustration. Magic wand statement. Then ... the most effective approach I know of is you and I working together to figure out how to ... I of course have a lot of ideas but many of them may not fit for you and your family. I really need your expertise to help me know which direction for us to explore together.

Seek Understanding

take time to understand multiple perspectives (mom, dad, child, caregiver, etc.)



Two Babies. Two Minutes

TRUST ME
I'm a...

When working with parents, our efforts to understand their perspectives and to view the world through their eyes is important in demonstrating respect and, over time, achieving trust.

Seek Understanding

BE CAREFUL ABOUT

- Assuming motivation, why a parent wants to do something or accomplish something
- "Why" questions
- Being "right"

DO ...

- Check for understanding
- Communicate you are interested in their viewpoints, ideas, values, etc.
- Create opportunities to see the world through their eyes/experiences

"Why" questions may be perceived of as challenging & unwittingly create defensiveness.

Instead consider using questions such as:

- In what ways might it change things for your child or for the rest of your family if we can teach him to play with toys by himself?
- Tell me what it will look like if we are successful with ...
- Tell me what will be different for your family when



Body Language Clip

Communicate to parents that
you want to know what they
are thinking, what is
important to them, and that
you value their input

Seeking Understanding

- Take the time to listen (without judgment)
- Convey that you have the time to listen
- Look relaxed – Breathe
- Quiet the “chatter” in your own head
- Use body language to show interest (leaning forward, eye contact, head nods)
- Use active listening skills to show interest and continue parents’ talking (oh, I see, hmmm, okay, uh huh ... aka affirmative feedback from the coaching world)

Seeking Understanding

- Avoid the urge to jump in with your opinions, ideas, suggestions, fill in the gaps of silence or to “fix” things ... seek understanding ... see the world through their lens ... walk a mile in their shoes so to speak
- Convey you have time to listen
- Ask relevant questions
 - “you mentioned on Friday that you were going to visit Sam’s grandparents over the weekend. I’m wondering how that went.”
 - “the meeting on Monday felt a little overwhelming to me with so many different people talking about so many different things. I wasn’t sure if you agreed with everyone’s input. I’m curious to know what you thought about the home visitor’s suggestion to use signs with Jenny.”
- Parent can say as much or as little as they like but you convey the desire to understand their opinions and point of view.

Frustrations vs. Opportunities

PROFESSIONAL

- Parent is more absorbed in talking about themselves rather than the child.
- But I'm not a therapist
- But I am so worried about the child I "need" to fix this

WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

- Top 2 needs of every person: safety & validation
- Don't need to be ... simply listen & validate
- How you ARE is as important as WHAT you do
– Jeree Pawl

The Importance of Nonverbal Cues
as told by "Friends"

When disagreements or misunderstandings occur

What happens if parents set unrealistic goals, fail to follow through, and/or outright reject our suggestions or approaches?

- Rupture & Repair – builds trust
- Direct energy to understanding vs. being understood
- As soon as we are certain we are "right" we are not really thinking but instead are in "survival mode" ourselves

Demonstrate Caring for the Whole Family

Family-Centered Approach
Holding the Family in Mind



There is no such thing
as a baby, there is a
baby and someone.

Attributed to Woody's Whinnycott.

Typically children are "enrolled" in services not parents. How do we communicate that we care about the well-being of the entire family not just the enrolled child?

Relationships are not built by pronouncements of program approaches and philosophy but instead in a more personal manner and incrementally through personal interactions over time

Attend to the parents' personal interests and family activities or events

- How did the camping trip go this past weekend? Did you get caught in any of those rain showers?
- Did you have a nice visit with your in-laws?
- I love the color of that yarn. Do you do a lot of knitting? Are you making it for yourself or a gift?
- Okay, who's the bowler around here? Do you play on a league?
- How'd your interview go on Wednesday? Do you think it's something you'd be interested in doing?
- You mentioned last week your mom was having knee surgery. How'd that go?
- How's the soccer player doing this season?

Be responsive to parents needs

- At the beginning of a visit parent talks about child being up all night ... you might say something like "I hope you can take it easy this evening and get some much needed sleep tonight. I'll be thinking about you."
- I know you've got a lot on your plate today with the apartment inspection coming up tomorrow. I'll be thinking good thoughts about you getting everything done on your list."

(holding the family in mind)

Aren't these the same types of questions
we'd ask a friend or a co-worker?

Too friendly??? Too intrusive???

- No goal of becoming bosom buddies ...
- We are attempting to create a working relationship – collaboration

Family-Centered

When exploring any potential intervention/activity
take the time to wonder about how the proposed
idea/activity might impact the whole family.

- Sleep strategy with crying that might interrupt others
- Independent feeding that might result in food being launched towards siblings or more messes to clean up.
- Are other family members on board? Is there time in their day? How's the stress level of the family? Is company coming from out of town? Is a vacation planned? Are siblings in the middle of a soccer tournament?

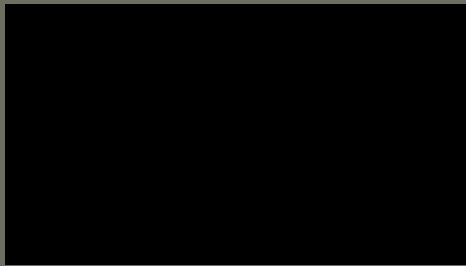
Acknowledge & Respond to Feelings

Bringing emotions out in the open may be a frightening
proposition both for the parent and the professional ...
AND ... both the parent AND the professional have
emotions before, during, and after visits

"How you are is as important
as what you do."
- Jeree Pawl

"Don't just do something—
stand there and pay attention."
- Sally Provence

Dr. Dan Siegel – Mirror Neurons



Video-taped observations of home visits between early intervention service providers and families (Brady et al. 2004)

- 13,145 verbal behaviors and 2,155 sequential patterns of exchanges between parents and professional coded.
- Category of professional verbal behavior that occurred least frequently was "accepts feelings." LESS than 1%!!!
- When families did express feelings professionals in the study tended to offer solutions to "fix" the problem rather than responding to the actual feelings.
 - Mother with tears in her eyes and nervously biting her nails says "Oh God, I really want her to be able to walk, you know? And, it's like she's not even sitting up yet."
 - Professional responds, "Let's get her on the sofa and work on sitting."

One parents' perspective – "forced intimacy"

(J. Fialka, 2001, p. 23)

"...because we are sitting with you during one of the most painful and confusing times of our life, we feel thrust into an uninvited and awkward closeness with you. We sit before you at one of our most vulnerable times. You enter our hearts. You hear our guilt and shame. You listen to our inadequacies. You are stung by our salty tears. You are witness to our pain. We may welcome the tender support and practical interventions, but the nature of the circumstances forces an immediate intimacy that is awkward ... I'm struck by the fact that we parents sometimes cry in front of people whose last names we don't know ... we're not sure what you think of us and our strong emotions. You as professionals have the opportunity to allow us our feelings, even to invite us to 'fall apart' once in a while in the presence of someone who understands and cares. Your compassion and nonjudgmental attitude can be a gift that decreases our sense of isolation, softens our stress ... "



Active Listening Steps

Acknowledge & Respond

AVOID

- Saying nothing – what does that communicate?
- Look on the bright side ...
- It could be worse ...
- At least you have ...
- Well let me tell you what happened to me.
- If you think that is bad listen to this!
- Use distraction.
- Jump in with a 'solution.'

EMBRACE

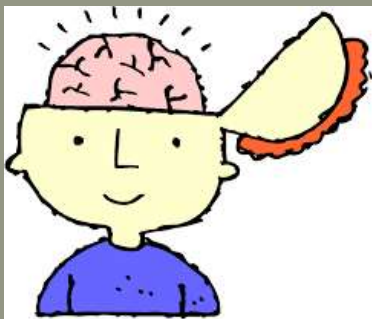
- Paying attention
- Respond first to emotion
- Utilize eye contact, body language, facial expressions, head nods, etc.
- Listening & validating
- Working towards solutions or enlisting assistance AFTER feelings are fully acknowledged & explained

Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Principles/Practices

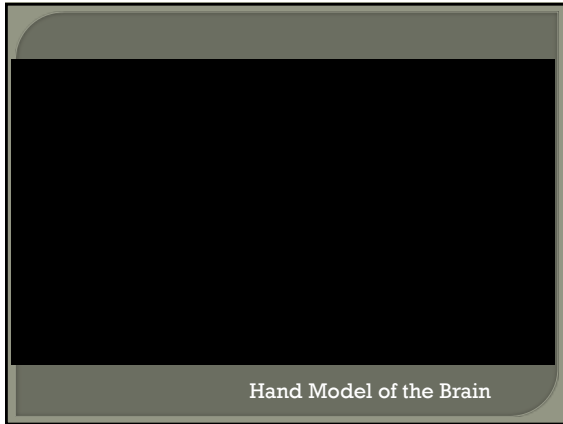
- Parallel process
- Holding environment
- Rupture and Repair
- Multiple perspectives
- Empathy and Compassion
- Professional Use of Self
- Cultural competency
- Reflective capacity

Rupture/Repair
Winnicott's Still Face Paradigm





When our lids flip ...



Promoting Trust, Respect & Collaboration with Families

- How do we view the families we work with?
- What is foremost in our minds? Our compassion & empathy or our frustration?
- Are we genuine with families? Do we truly believe parents are equal partners?
- How do we put families' in charge? How do we form those relationships?

Wisdom from Robin Rose

www.robinrose.com

- Keep in mind everyone has the same top 2 needs: Safety & Validation
- Maintain unconditional respect for families
- When we catch ourselves thinking we are 'right' we may no longer be thinking
- Breathe
- If we believe it will work out we will see the opportunities with families
- Quit taking it personally QTIP

Remember ...

- Utilize reflective supervision
- If you are 'feeling' something so is the parent and/or child (parallel process)
- Assume the best intention (positive regard)
- Meet & accept families where they are
- Notice Ruptures, Practice Repair
- Consider all perspectives & be mindful of cultural
- Embrace empathy and compassion as a daily practice with families and colleagues
- HOW you are IS as important as WHAT you do – Professional Use of Self

References

- McWilliam, P.J., Working with families of young children with special needs. *Talking to Families*, p.127-142
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